

ADVERTISEMENTS ON THE TREATMENT OF VENEREAL DISEASE AND THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF VENEREAL DISEASE

BY

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The general attitude towards venereal disease that may be shown at any particular period reflects to a surprisingly large extent the spirit of the time. In an application to the "Quarter Sessions Recognizances" in Manchester, Easter 1628, "Elizabeth the wyef of Henrie Lees of Redich (Reddish near Stockport) caryer" in asking protection for herself and her husband, complains that "Richard Thorpe of Feylsworth, Blacksmyth, hath verie dishonestlie and maliciouslie miscaryed himself towards your petitioner's husband, not onelie by infectinge his former wyef with contagious and loathsome diseases by adulterous dealinge with her but likewise to take awaye your petitioner's husband lief . . ." An application to the Manchester Quarter Sessions in 1651 refers to "a pore young woman in our towne of Ashton-under-Lyne infected with a filthy decesse called the French pöxe" (France and Fessler, 1945). To call a venereal infection "loathsome and filthy" is typical of the puritanical spirit of the seventeenth century. A Satirical article by J. Addison in the *Tatler* in 1710 (reprinted by Harrison, 1943) on the surgical restoration of noses destroyed by syphilis demonstrates the lighthearted and frivolous attitude with which venereal disease was regarded during the larger part of the eighteenth century.

Trevelyan has stressed the fact that social changes occur gradually and slowly, and therefore there is always an overlapping of ideas and customs. This fact applies also to the attitude shown towards venereal disease. Further, it has to be kept in mind that different classes of society usually show a different attitude. Puritanism in the seventeenth century was especially strong in the provinces and in the north; the courtiers of Charles II in London thought differently about a venereal infection. D'Arcy Power (1934) reported an incidence which is in complete contrast to the puritanical attitude in the north, namely that in 1662 the vicar of Stratford-on-Avon treated some of his parishioners for gonorrhoea and, apparently, thought nothing about it.

An Eighteenth-Century Advertisement

It seems to be worth recording the following advertisement from a London newspaper because it shows how broadminded and tolerant the general attitude towards venereal disease was still at the end of the eighteenth century. Mr. J. Morris evidently did not object to the public's being informed of his infection, which of course, is alleged to have been acquired in France. Mr. R. Edwards, Clerk of St. Michael's Church in Bristol (that is, clerk to the parish) reports the case without any moral apprehension. Both names might be fictitious, but the fact remains that it was possible to use the authority of a person connected with the church to make propaganda for a patent medicine for the treatment of venereal disease. A short time later, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, such an advertisement would have been quite impossible.

The advertisement appears in *The Star**, of Tuesday, December 31, 1793.

A REMARKABLE CASE

TO THO. TAYLOR, Surgeon,
No. 9 New Bridge-street,
Blackfriars, London.

Dear Sir,

JOHN MORRIS, of the Parish of St. Michael, in the City of Bristol, Mariner, (a free Burgess of the said City) contracted a virulent Venereal Disorder at Bordeaux, the first appearances of which were soon removed by a little Care and Medicine; soon after he was seized with a violent and excruciating pain in the head, which was attended by almost an entire baldness on the fore-part, with loss of sight and hearing, this pain was also removed, but he still continuing blind and deaf, was attacked by a dreadful pain in all his limbs, so that he could not walk, sit or lie, without the most torturing pain; this pain was attended with a large swelling on the inside of each

* This newspaper and the other newspapers and documents mentioned are deposited in the Record Office of the Lancashire County Council, Preston. I am much indebted to Mr. R. Sharpe France, County Archivist, for his help.

thigh. In this state I was requested to go and see him ; he appeared to me, and to all about him to be very near the point of death ; I found the Gentlemen of the Faculty, of a Public Institution, had done what they could for him, as appeared by their not choosing, when applied to, to offer any further assistance. Recollecting I had read in the Bristol Mercury of a surprising cure performing by your LEAKE's Patent Pills, attested by James Joshua Jones, Esq. I called a few of his friends together, and after consulting with him, we all agreed to try some of them on him ; he proceeded regularly in taking of them, the consequence of which was that in a fortnight he could walk, see, and hear, and his swellings were gone ; he mended so rapidly as to astonish all around him; and when he had been through his course, and recovered his strength, we doubt not, he will again be able to go to sea, and earn his bread.

For him, he not only authorises, but begs the favour of me to entreat you to accept his most undesigned and sincere thanks, for such an amazing Restoration to Health, from the brink of the grave ; and as a testimony of his gratitude to you, and for the good of Mankind, he begs you to make this, his Case, public.

For myself, I cordially congratulate you, on possessing the most unparalleled, cheap, and safe Medicine in the Universe, and assure you that I shall on all occasions in private, as well as in this public manner, bear testimony of its wonderful effects; in proof of which I beg leave to subscribe myself.

SIR,

Your very much obliged humble servant,

RICH. EDWARDS.

Clerk of St. Michael's Church, in Bristol.

Church-lane, St. Michael's,
Bristol, 24th Jan. 1792.

Witness JOHN MORRIS,

The above Medicine is recommended to all persons who are in any doubt of their being entirely free of every Venereal Affection, as it will certainly eradicate every taint of that nature ; for Scorbutic, Glandular, and Cutaneous Complaints it is also recommended to be taken, especially in the Spring, Summer, and Fall.

Prepared and sold by the sole proprietor, THOMAS TAYLOR, Member of the Corporation of Surgeons, London, at his home, No. 9 New Bridge-street, where he will give advice, without a fee, to persons taking these pills, and will answer patients' letters, if post-paid, on the same terms, observing in all cases the most inviolable secrecy.

N.B. A back Door, and Lights in the Passages at Night.

They are sold, by his appointment, for the convenience of those living at a distance, at the Perfumer's No. 35, St. Alban's-street, Pall-Mall ; Mr. Robertson's Toy-shop, No. 133, Oxford-street ; Mr. Steel's, Bookseller, No. 1, Union-row, Little Tower hill ; Mr. Bulgin's, Bristol ; and by one person in every considerable town in England, in boxes of only 2s. 9d.

each, sealed up with full and plain directions, whereby persons of either sex may cure themselves, with ease and secrecy.

Puritanism in the Nineteenth Century

The tolerance of the eighteenth century was replaced by a completely different attitude in the nineteenth. Venereal disease had become something that was sinful and degrading and which had to be kept secret at all costs. As it had become improper to print the word "venereal disease" in a newspaper*, this word had to be replaced in the advertisements by phrases such as "certain disorders," "certain insidious diseases," "a few prevailing diseases frequently contracted in a moment of intoxication," "that cruel disease, which is so dreadful a scourge for illicit pleasure."

A typical example of an advertisement in the first half of the nineteenth century is the following, from the *Blackburn Alfred* of September 25, 1833.

IN CASES OF SECRECY

use the True, Genuine, and old-established Dr. Cullen's highly approved Abstergent

SCARLET PILLS

sold wholesale and retail by appointment, authorised by Letters "Patent."

Sold wholesale and retail, by appointment, by Wood & Morrice, Alfred Office, Blackburn, and the under-mentioned agents. Dr. Bullock, Chemist, King Street, Manchester, and at St. Steven's Street, Salford ; Mr. Davies, Druggist, Deansgate, Manchester ; St. Thompson, Druggist, Deansgate, Manchester ; J. Heaton, and Sons, Booksellers ; &c., Stamp Office, and Richard Cooper, Druggist, Deansgate, Bolton ; William Cockcroft, Druggist, &c., Yorkshire Street, Rochdale ; W. Wright, Chester Gate, Macclesfield ; Sutton, Nottingham ; Bryer, Derby ; Gething, Druggist, and Collinson, Bookseller, Mansfield ; Gornall, Market-place, Preston ; William Moore, Post-office, Buxton ; and by the principal patent medicine venders in every town throughout England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

In boxes at 2s. 9d. each, or five boxes in one, at 11s. with full and explicit directions, by which either sex may, with the utmost facility, cure themselves.

The advertisement then goes on, in the usual style, for considerable length. "An enormously rapid sale of 10,000 boxes annually" is boldly claimed. The pills are of "matchless superiority" and are "the only eradicator of that deadly distemper." They are "strongly recommended to the attention of sea-faring men." The word "venereal" is not mentioned at all.

* In leaflets from the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries dealing with patent medicines for venereal diseases, the word "venereal" is not omitted, very likely on account of their limited circulation (Fessler, 1946).

Factors in the Changing Attitude

The remarkable change of the attitude towards venereal disease has been caused mainly by two factors. One is the change in the social structure of the country. As a result of industrialization the middle classes had come to the fore. More and more the general mode of life became formed by them and no longer, as in earlier times, by high society. The second cause is the raising of the general moral standard as a consequence of the Evangelical Reform Movement in the Churches. This change of attitude was spread over a certain period. The overlapping of two different attitudes can clearly be seen in Dr. Taylor's advertisement in the year 1793. After first committing, in the modern sense, a breach of confidence, he then promises his patients "the most inviolate secrecy in all cases." He stresses the fact that "a back Door, and Light in the Passages at Night" are available so that one can enter the house without being seen. Another example is found in the *Preston Advertiser*, where, on June 8, 1793, Dr. Solomon announces that "at his home No. 24 Strand Street, Liverpool, He cures with fidelity and secrecy (a certain private disorder), recent or of long standing, attended by the worst of symptoms . . ." In the same newspaper on November 22 of the same year "Dr. Arnold's Pills" are recommended as "an efficacious remedy for the venereal disease." On the other hand one finds occasionally even in the first half of the nineteenth century advertisements which mention venereal disease without any transcription (possibly some editors were less strict). When even the representatives of the quack treatment had discarded the dogma of the unity of the venereal diseases, advertisements can be seen which are specified either for syphilis or for gonorrhœa (Fessler and France, 1947).

The conviction that venereal disease had to be treated as taboo, an attitude typical of the Victorian period, was of course not restricted to England. For example, in the *American Traveller*, Boston, Massachusetts, on July 14, 1877, there is an advertisement on the treatment of gonorrhœa with sandalwood but "gonorrhœa" is not mentioned. The advertisement simply states:

SANDALWOOD

Possesses a much greater power in restoring to a healthy state the mucus membrane of the urethra than either cubebs or copaiba. It never produces sickness . . .

On March 28, 1868, a Professor F. Morille and a Doctor W. F. Padelford, both in Boston, had put advertisements in an earlier number of the *American Traveller*. The former states that he "continues

to be confidentially and successfully consulted on all forms of private diseases" and that "his facilities are such (being in correspondence with the most celebrated physicians of the old world) of obtaining the safest as well as the latest remedies for these diseases . . ." The latter asks to be "consulted on all diseases incident to the human frame" and promises to give "particular attention to diseases of the urinary organs, and all diseases of a private nature, in both sexes." One gets the impression that advertisements of patent medicines for the treatment of venereal diseases are relatively rare in the American newspapers. In the very detailed paper, "The Doctor and the Newspaper in the Territory of Michigan 1817-1837," by F. J. Anderson (1947) only one drug for the treatment of venereal disease is mentioned, namely "Shinn's Panacea."

The unfortunate desire to keep everything about venereal disease as secret as possible lasted, with all its evil consequences, up to recent times. Even now, after the emancipation of women, after more changes in the social structure, and after two world wars, this attitude has not yet completely disappeared. It is realized, however, that venereal disease is not simply a medical, a moral, or a legal problem, but that it is foremost a social problem.

Sources of Study

Changes in the general attitude towards venereal disease and the differences which can be seen in different classes of society and in different countries make up part of what might be called the social history of venereal disease. Sources for the study of this subject are scanty and widely scattered. It is very difficult to say to what extent venereal diseases have spread at any given period.

No statistical data are available before the second half of the nineteenth century (some of the Scandinavian countries excepted), although there is plenty of data about the infection of individuals. The information from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries usually relates to the infection of kings and noblemen, that from the following centuries being concerned mostly with famous men, such as poets and artists. Very little is known about the spread of venereal diseases among ordinary people and how they reacted to their infection, or where they went for treatment. Rolleston (1934, 1938), D'Arcy Power (1934), and McLachlan (1943) demonstrated that valuable information can be obtained from careful search of contemporary lay literature. Lay writers, however, rarely approach the problem of venereal disease objectively. The writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries used to treat it in a satirical vein. At the end of the nineteenth

century and the first decade of the present century the tendency was to overemphasize the tragic consequences of an infection. Useful information about the social background of venereal disease in former times can be obtained from legal documents which deal with the problems of every-day life, for example applications to the Quarter Sessions.

Another source of information is the study of advertisements and leaflets dealing with the quack treatment of venereal diseases. The frequency with which such advertisements appeared in provincial newspapers (my examination has been mainly of Lancashire newspapers), the list of addresses of agents for the sale of the drugs, and statements that the drugs can be "bought in every considerable town," give the impression that venereal disease was prevalent in the provinces. If so, this might have been a consequence of industrialization and the rapid increase of the urban population. One very important factor, however, has to be kept in mind. In early eighteenth-century advertisements the word syphilis or one of the popular synonyms was used, and the symptoms described, such as "universal breakings out," "blotchy eruptions," "nodes on the shin bones," etc., clearly refer to the different stages of syphilis. Later the description of the various symptoms becomes more and more obscure. It is, for instance, impossible to tell exactly from what disease Mr. Morris was suffering. If one assumes that it was neurosyphilis (which would not explain the "large swelling on the inside of each thigh"), then "Leake's Patent Pills" indeed achieved a miracle.

From the numerous references to "debility, seminal weakness, impotence, secrete vice, etc.," it is obvious that the advertisements and leaflets were meant to attract people with sexual neurasthenia. Moreover there can be no doubt that those with venereal-disease-phobia were attracted too. If anyone believed he was infected and did not want to consult a "Gentleman of the Faculty" from fear of being "mercurialized" or for some other reason, he visited one of the "advertising doctors," as Smollet called them in "Roderick Random" (quoted by D'Arcy Power). Smollet accuses these doctors of "fleecing," and one can be sure that they began treatment whatever was the matter with the patient.

The difficulties in pre-laboratory days of making a correct diagnosis must also be remembered and the following remark by Smollet (quoted by Rolleston) in "Travels through France and Italy" is probably typical of the whole period, for graduates of medicine as well as for quacks. Smollet states

that "he has reason to believe that the celebrated (for the treatment of venereal infections) Professor F— (Antoine Fize, Professor of Medicine at Montpellier) has cured many patients that were never diseased." If one could not visit an "advertising doctor" one could write to him, and, provided money was included with the letter, one received a "Book of Instructions" or a "bill of copious and particular directions," and confirmation of the diagnosis and treatment was left to oneself. Or one could buy the remedy, which one had seen advertised, at one of the places mentioned in the advertisement: in the eighteenth century these might include a "Bookseller, a Perfumer, and a Toyshop." At the beginning of the nineteenth century one could already go to a druggist or chemist, but the appropriate drug could still be bought at a printing office, a newspaper office, or sometimes even at a post office, as in Buxton in 1833.

Opportunity for Quacks

The lack of treatment facilities for the poor people infected with venereal disease (which was the cause of the application to the Manchester Quarter Session in 1651) remained throughout the centuries. General hospitals (many of them were founded during the philanthropic area of the eighteenth century) refused to admit patients with syphilis. This unfortunate situation was only partly corrected by the foundation of "Lock Hospitals" in some of the bigger towns (the first hospital of this type was founded in London in 1746). The lack of treatment facilities favoured quack treatments. It is characteristic that some quack doctors offered (in theory at least) "free advice to the poor." The secrecy, which surrounded the venereal diseases problem during the nineteenth century was another factor favouring the quacks. However, in 1916, when the State took over the responsibility of providing treatment for everybody infected, whether rich or poor, the quack treatment of venereal disease came to an end.

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